HOME

Suyi Diao

When his daughter and son-in-law picked him up from the airport, Lao Liu’s first question was when he could go home.

Although it was the first time for him to go abroad, it was by no means the first time Liu took an airplane. Lao Liu was a figure in China, in his time, and hundreds of people were under his command. Some people called him secretary Liu, some called him boss Liu, and others even gave him name like “CEO Liu”. Sitting on a plane was, of course, no big deal, Liu thought to himself. Looking back on his life, he did things for his country that had made a huge impact: wearing BOSS suits to travel all around the country, meeting, discussing, and spending money on multiple cross-city projects. But more proudly in Liu’s memory, all of his spending throughout these travels was reimbursed by his country. He could stretch his legs, twist his hips, bend his neck, breathe, exhale, and feel free. Sometimes he even thought that the only difference between him and the head of state was whether or not there is a guard beside him while he walks.

After Liu had drunk every strange, colorful liquid on the plane, he got quite filled and stood up for the toilet. One of the stalls was occupied so Liu went to the unoccupied one naturally and started unzipping his pants. When he was prepared to “let it all out”, Lao Liu suddenly felt a big firm hand on his shoulder, like an eagle grabbing a small chick, taking him right out of the toilet. It was a huge Australian man in a white vest. He stood there, with dragon-carved tattoos on his arms and two eyeballs shooting lightning towards him. He asked Liu to line up for the toilet, but Liu would not listen to him. He put up his pants and asked why he couldn’t use this toilet if it was not occupied. The man brought Lao Liu to the front of the door and asked him to check the sign out. The door had a sign for disabled people only. Liu was not convinced, yet he did not say anything. He thought, foreigners were really a bunch of dead brains and fool eggs who would rather line up here for some imaginary disabled people but not use this one. But he no longer dared to step forward because he was afraid that the big man would throw him out of the plane and he would freeze to death in the cold air. He went back to the seat and just pissed in his own pants.

This was clearly a racial discrimination, at least against Chinese people, wasn’t it? When the plane was embraced by the sunrise over the Pacific Ocean, Lao Liu, as usual, got up and walked in the aisles of the cabin to practice Tai Chi, Tong Zi Kong, and Fan Kong. Lao Liu knew in his heart that with China’s peaceful rise and becoming so powerful that it had been spotlighted by the world. On this international stage, Lao Liu must promote China’s broad and profound culture and the good qualities of the Chinese people. When he held himself on both sides of the aisle with his hands and stood proudly as if he was doing a 360-degree spin on the gymnastics parallel bars, the onboard security guard stepped up, picked up Liu, heavily threw him back to his original seat, and buckled his seat belts. Lao Liu was really angry this time. He just wanted to communicate with the foreigners in this aircraft about Chinese culture and let the world know more about his country. Why were they so ignorant? After practicing martial arts, he was going to clear his throat for some Beijing Opera practice. But this crew member... Lao Liu simply turned his head and looked out of the window. In the last hour, he did not even move.

The customs, along with two mental doctors, gave him the stamp of entry after a short meeting and handed it directly to his daughter and son-in-law. They warmly greeted him by calling out Dad but rolled their eyes at the same time. Liu sat in the car. Outside the window was a flat road, a quiet street, and luxuriant flowers and plants. But he didn't appreciate any of it. He really regretted the long journey to a capitalist country and he blamed nearly all of his friends for that. After all, if most of his comrades did not go aboard, he would never do such thing. What was he doing here while he could do anything he wanted back home? Unsurprisingly, within a few days, relying on many years of the communist party’s education and the understanding of Lao Liu’s own comprehension, he found strong evidence that showed capitalism is bound to perish. First, the chicken had no flavor at all, and even the pork tasted weird. Second, people seemed to be really bothered when he smoked in the restaurant. Thirdly, Liu was forced to look at the traffic lights when crossing any roads which he thought to be an absolutely overkill. Fourth, the downtown area only contained very few buildings, high ones especially. Not even comparable to Liu’s community, not to mention the city he lived in, which contained millions of people in a very small area. Fifth, the girls wore their pants below the waists. Lao Liu finally learned that these so-called freedoms and prosperities in the capitalism country were in no way comparable to his own.

Liu was not only infuriated by capitalism. Although his son-in-law came from a countryside, he, like Liu’s daughter, was also a graduate of a prestigious university’s physics department. As Liu often bragged to his previous comrades, they studied cutting-edge science and advanced theory so their future was supposed to be Einstein's successor. But instead, they had crossed the ocean to work in Australia to clean phone booths. Not only that, they needed to wipe 30-40 booths a day. And they not only rubbed but also employed a handful of people to rub booths together with them and yet they were still satisfied with their lives. Lao Liu believed in his heart that these works should be done by people from lower classes and by poor ones. But Liu’s daughter and his son-in-law couldn’t be more satisfied with the current situation. They also said they plan to wipe more telephone booths, including those throughout the city, in the malls, and even in the dark alley! Lao Liu was truly embarrassed by their job and all he could think about was how he could ever say anything ever to his friends.

To say that Liu’s son-in-law is a country man is not quite accurate, it would be more precise to say that he was a mountaineer. Farming, herding sheep, working in the city, going to college, marrying a wife, and going abroad, one word: pragmatic. None of Liu’s family approved of him when his daughter got married to this down-to-earth man. He was too poor and too uneducated. But the son-in-law put up a banquet, took his daughter's hand and said, “Me? Or your Dad? Follow me today, then it’s a wedding. If not, be gone after the dinner!” Liu’s daughter cried and cried but chose to follow her lover. Pragmatism is the most fundamental thing that flows inside this man's vein. And it was this practical guy who disagreed with Lao Liu’s thought on their current occupation. He knew very well they would made half of what they did now if they went to, say, do research in a University. He poured a cup of tea and put it in front of Lao Liu. "Dad, you think we have learned nothing with our higher education. You think we're having a really crappy job in this paradise that is called a foreign country. You are ashamed of us and you can never face your friends again. But Dad, why are you living such a tired life? In fact, we think there is nothing wrong with our lives. What we do is indeed aligned with our own profession. For example, when we were wiping off dust with a rag, we were showing that according to the basic principles of physics, smaller quality objects always follow the bigger ones; when we were putting money into the pouch, this is itself a process of material movement toward the end of fate. Having more money means your quality has become greater. And with greater quality, your gravitational force becomes larger. In turn, large gravitation force can attract large materials, like a mansion with a tennis court and swimming pool or a car with a sofa set with a television or overseas travel with first class cabins or you with PR (green card)." Liu, without any emotions shown on his face, did not say a single word for seven days straight after this talk.

On the eighth day, a severe toothache brought Lao Liu to the hospital. Traditional Chinese medicine would say that this was caused by “fire” raised with anger; Western doctors said that the tooth roots were rotten and needed to be pulled out. The doctors told Liu if he goes to a private hospital, he could pay and be done with it for today; however, if he went to a public hospital, he would need to take a number and queue up. No one knew how long he would need to wait. Lao Liu’s face went red and hot, aching the same time with his tooth after he heard about queuing. He thought he not only had to line up for a damn toilet, but also for a toothache? Was this country reasonable at all? He was almost seventy years old and he deserved to be respected. Wasn’t Australia known to the world as a civilized country and heaven to the old people? Hell, it just got worse every day. Lao Liu was really on with the hospital. He just laid down on the floor and demanded to be the first to be taken care of. The consciousness of foreign doctors and the awareness of Chinese doctors cannot be compared. When they saw Lao Liu on the floor, almost aching to death, they simply ignored him. Lao Liu finally got up, and he said that he would go to the court to sue the hospital. But the hospital could really care less. So Lao Liu said that they should respect the elderly, but the hospital said that the elderly should also respect the community and respect other patients. If he ever lay there again, they would strip his qualification for registration in this hospital. Lao Liu had no choice but to get up and walk away with his aching mouth.

Lao Liu was an educated man, anything but a rapscallion. He was singing “The Evening in the Outskirts of Moscow” when he fell in love with his wife. He also recited Gorky’s “Swallow” at the wedding. He specialized in making tanks in college and designed the tanks to be very powerful and fierce with everything a tank might need inside. His tank was so strong just like the lyrics goes: If the imperialists dared to invade, we will resolutely eliminate them. However, the quality of the steel produced could not be put into making tanks, so Lao Liu went to the steel mills to supervise the quality of the steel; but it still did not work because of the fuel problems. So Lao Liu went to the coal mine; but then a problem with equipment supply arose, so Lao Liu went all out to supervise purchasing and logistics. Thirty years had gone by and when the Liu was promoted as the general manager of the “coal, wool, and sweater” sales department, the tank was still just on paper.

Lao Liu felt that he was an intellectual with an identity and a strong status. He knew in his heart that the moon in the foreign countries was no better than China, but it was brighter because of less pollution. However, it was really hard for people to live when they needed to depend on somebody else. Lao Liu wanted to count on her daughter, but his daughter only listened to her husband. Every sentence her husband said was very realistic and faultless in essence, but when Liu heard of it, his words felt very wrong, as if it came out of the mouth of a witch. Lao Liu complained that sandwiches and hot dogs tasted awful and often too difficult to swallow. His son in law said that he was too busy to even have time for a restroom trip, so he couldn’t really cook for him. Liu was really angry. Didn’t the book say that you will have human rights when you are full? And if you have human rights, you should be happy? What, then, are you working towards if you have been struggling for your whole life? Liu said that their car was not a branded one and so not luxurious enough. His son-in-law said that Liu worked to the end of his career and did not even own a tire. Lao Liu said that this country of Australia could not be saved, with everybody so lazy sunbathing and drinking beer. Except for driving too fast in this country, everything else works too slowly. His son in law thought it “strange” too. He said to Liu: Back in China, we eat well and live well. The leadership of our country is wise and the system is the best. The 1.3 billion people are all masters of the country. The people are the most hard-working ones. Then how can they not live better lives than these Australian bugs? Dad, can you find the answer in the little red book (a kind of book every Chinese had back during the Cultural Revolution)?

Lao Liu was suffering in this crappy place called Australia. Looking at this son-in-law, he has changed from a Chinese countryman to an Australian countryman. Lao Liu could not agree with this. So, he was tempted every day, cursing his own daughter, cursing his son-in-law, and cursing this corrupted capitalist system. In the span of two weeks, Liu spent thirteen and a half days doing nothing but swearing. During that half day when he was not in the mood to swear, Lao Liu woke up really early in the morning and went to the ATM to see if the government's retirement money had come in. Holding the balance in his hand, he said: Capitalism is not good at all, except its credibility and its credibility. After the money arrived in his account, Lao Liu felt that it was necessary for the comrades in several organizations to organize a life meeting, unify thoughts, and strengthen their beliefs. But somehow, the comrades in the organization became underground parties as soon as they arrived in Australia. Except for Lao Liu, none of the others could not be found or located. The son-in-law said to his wife to take her father to see the doctor. The old man was going to get sick if he did not stop cursing. The one thing that neither of them could comprehend was why did Liu waste the good days and spend them on discussing something that he couldn’t change at all. Liu was too old to argue with his son-in-law; Liu’s English was too bad to argue with his son-in-law; Liu could not leave his son-in-law. Without him, Liu could not hear, could not see, could not speak, and could not move. He was basically a disabled person without him. Lao Liu made up his mind and came up with a conclusion: he had to go home.

But he didn’t. The place where tickets are sold opened every day, and the planes in the air flew every day. But the only thing Liu did was to hold the money from the government tightly. His hands and feet were not tied, but he could not step back home. Lao Liu kept on counting the accounts when he found out the rule was that the exchange of RMB to Australian dollars was by a division, and yet that the Australian dollar was multiplied when changing into RMB, which was really unfair. After calculation, he found out capitalism gave a lot more retirement money than socialism. In order to overthrow this system of capitalism, he called “Wan Sui” for a lifetime. Yet when he was white-headed, he became the parasite of this decadent system. After eating out on socialism, he went on eating the capitalism. Liu quietly asked his daughter if he could return to China but continue to take money from here. His daughter simply replied, it’s a crime.

Eventually, Liu returned home. But the process did not go smoothly. The night before he returned home, his son-in-law brought in some police officers. He told the police that Liu was engaged in class struggle at home. He purposely used CLASS STRUGGLE to give some justice to their beloved cats because Liu killed them for this reason. Apparently after careful examinations and logical calculation, Liu couldn’t find anyone to blame for this corrupted system. So, he turned on the cats as they were the only living things around him at the time. He took these “enemies” very seriously and followed a serious of standard operations that he would do during cultural revolution: binding, “taking air-plane”, suspended, and beaten. The cats were members of the family and even though killing cats and killing people were not the same crime, but it can cause the same concern. The police officer asked Liu’s wish and he only said that he wanted to go home and leave this filthy place.

Lao Liu was gone. The daughter of Lao Liu was covered in tears. His son-in-law was sighing: “What a pity. The Chinese intellectuals. What a pity.” He remembered that when his mother was still carrying him around in a basket, she drove the pigs out of the mountain, sold the pig and took the money. The mother always murmured: "what a pity, what a pity." He always wondered if it was for the money or for her life. The thick native dialect contains endless sorrow. "What a pity, what a pity."

Six months after he returned to his loyal system and home, Lao Liu seemed to have forgotten something in Australia or seemed to think that the capitalism society still owed him something. He quietly returned to Australia. This time, he did not live in his daughter's house.

One day, the daughter said to her husband: “My dad said that the sky here is blue and the water is good.” The next day the daughter said: “Dad said I have good eyesight to find a man who is honest and kind.” On the third day, the daughter said: “Today I went with Dad to see the land of his graveyard, I went to a place with high hills that faces the sun and paid the deposit. Dad was always afraid of cremation.” On the fourth day, the daughter cuddled in her husband’s arms and murmured that Dad wanted to eat the dishes she made. The man replied: "OK, OK, let’s welcome your Dad to move in."

Finally, the man looked at the dark ceiling and said "what a pity".